

Model Essay Two

This student essay analyzes theme in a short story as revealed through the central character and his actions.

That Which Does Not Kill Us Only Makes Us Stronger—Or Does It?

Thesis

Every human being, from Adam and Eve on, has faced trials and hardships and will surely be disillusioned and hurt by both loved ones and enemies. How we react to those trials determines whether we will grow in wisdom and understanding or whether we will be defeated. Goodman Brown, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown,"¹ also experiences disillusionment. He takes a journey into the forest with the devil and is tempted into becoming one of his followers. When the devil shows him that the people he admires, even his wife, Faith, have succumbed to evil, he becomes disillusioned. Though he himself resists the devil in the end, he "gives up" on mankind and lets his discovery affect his life in a negative way. *Hawthorne's theme is that disappointments in life and disillusionments in people eventually bring us to a turning point in our lives where we must choose to either learn and grow from our trials or let them defeat us. He conveys this theme through the development of Goodman Brown's character. Goodman moves from naivete to disillusionment, and as a result, chooses to live a defeated life.*

Topic Sentence

Before going on his journey, the naive Goodman Brown has faith in all the people he loves and admires. He believes totally in the goodness of his wife. He thinks that "she's a blessed angel on earth; and . . . [he'll] cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven" (106). Goodman feels his Faith can do no wrong and if he lives his life with this holy woman, he, too, can reach heaven. He also feels the same way about his father: "My father never went into the woods on such an [evil] errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs . . ." (107). Goodman refuses to even think that his father could have sinned and believes that since his ancestors were "Christians," they were above sin. It seems as though he thinks that Christianity and sinlessness are synonymous. When Goodman Brown sees Goody Cloyse, he "recognized a very pious and exemplary dame, who had taught him his catechism in youth, and was still his moral and spiritual advisor, jointly with the minister Deacon Gookin" (108). Even more remote was the possibility that his catechism teacher and his minister would commit sin. Obviously he felt that they, being in the ministry, were even closer to God than average Christians.

Topic Sentence

Young Goodman Brown experiences a rude awakening when he learns that everyone he has ever loved or admired has sinned. The devil tells him, "I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was

¹Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," *An Introduction to Literature*, ed. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto, 9th ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989) 105–116.

I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village . . .'" (107). He learns here that even when cruel acts are committed in the name of "justice" or with popular consent, they are still sin. He recognizes many church members of Salem Village, famous for their piousness—Deacon Gookin, his pastor, elders of the church—and ". . . there were men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame, wretches given over to all mean and filthy vice and suspected of horrid crimes. It was strange to see that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints" (113). All the people he so highly respected were mingling comfortably with the sinners. He is crushed to see that the very people he was taught to shun are now seemingly on an equal basis with those he was taught to respect. He is now almost defeated in spirit and in ". . . faith and overburdened with the heavy sickness of his heart" (111). However, he still has one glimmer of faith left as he thinks about his lovely wife, Faith: "With heaven above and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil!" (111). As long as Faith is still pure, he can go on. But when he hears her voice in that dark cloud, he shouts, "'Faith!' . . . in a voice of agony and desperation" (111). His cry of "grief, rage, and terror" (111) comes to a climax when he sees Faith's pink ribbon floating down. He now knows that even his Faith—his last ray of hope in mankind—has let him down.

Topic Sentence

Goodman Brown, feeling totally disillusioned, lets defeat be the ruler of his life. At the end of his trip into the forest, he exclaims, "My faith is gone!" . . . "There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given" (112). He feels that since everybody—even his Faith—has let him down, life is meaningless for him. He sees everyone as a hypocrite. After coming back to the village from his journey, he sees life differently. When he passes by the minister who bestows a blessing on him, "he shrank from the venerable saint as if to avoid an anathema" (116). He no longer has the feeling of reverence for his minister, for he saw him in sin. When he hears Old Deacon Gookin praying, he now thinks, "What God doth the wizard pray to?" (116). He held the deacon in such high esteem before, but now that he knows that he, too, is a secret sinner, he loses all respect for him. When Goodman Brown sees Goody Cloyse teaching a little girl her catechism, he "snatched away the child as from the grasp of the fiend himself" (116). He couldn't bear to see a woman who was consorting with the devil teaching God's truths. And when he finally sees Faith, the one he trusts most, she is overjoyed, but he just "looked sternly and sadly into her face and passed on without a greeting" (116). He has let his new knowledge of everyone's secret sins rule his emotions, and he can no longer see them as he did before. He lets these feelings rule his life: "A stern, sad, and darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from that night of that fearful dream" (116). He can't listen to a sermon or sing a holy psalm because he now sees all people as blasphemers. He has come from total naivete to cynicism. He has let his disillusionment overshadow and destroy his life. He has made his decision.

*Restatement
of Thesis*

And so, through Young Goodman Brown's journey from naivete to disillusionment and eventual defeat, Hawthorne brings out his theme: we all must make a decision, at some time or other in our lives, as to whether life's disappointments will help to build our character or destroy our lives. Goodman Brown had an unrealistic view of life in the beginning. He saw those he loved as "saints," and when he learned about their weaknesses, he could not overcome his feelings of disillusionment. He let them control his life. Like Goodman Brown, we, too, surely will be disappointed by our family and friends. Our faith, however, should be in God and not in other men because they will always let us down. Even when we are let down, we must not let it destroy our lives. No matter how difficult the hardship is that we have to face, we cannot let it conquer and defeat us. We should try to gain insight and wisdom from that particular trial to strengthen and prepare us to face other even greater trials. We must also not let self-righteousness cloud our view of others, for not many can live up to the high standards we may set for ourselves. Life's trials can be stepping stones to greater understanding and compassion for others. From them, we can gain inner strength and a greater appreciation for life. Happiness is a decision—a decision that can kill us . . . or make us stronger. Young Goodman Brown "died" that next morning.

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INTRODUCTION	YES	NO / REVIEW
Clear Lead		
Author / Title		
Plot Summary		
Arguable Thesis		
BODY PARAGRAPH		
Topic sentence that sets an expectation		
Introduction of quote		
Quote given and documented		
Discussion of how the quote proves the topic sentence		
Clearly expressed sentences		